

Oliver L. Jackson, published in Spanish in Mireia Sentís, *En el pico del águila: Una introducción a la cultura afroamericana* (Madrid: Ediciones Ardora, 1998):

Mireia Sentís: *What path has African art taken through African American artists?*

*Oliver L. Jackson:* I would like to change the phrase African art to African sensibility. It is clear to me the African sensibility informs so-called art objects. With this understanding, there is no path, there is an active sensibility, a vital African continuum that does not depend upon African “art” objects/artifacts to follow or inform it.

If the request is to show a direct linkage to African traditional art or aesthetics, then it is revealed in the dress mode, stance mode, religious mode, thought mode, eating mode, etc. of African peoples throughout the world. All of these expressions, resulting from various modes of living/reality, are African sensibility in action and are a direct path from the sensibility originating in Africa. It is an observable fact that the African sensibility is enjoyed and appreciated by others, and the objects that it has created *resonate* the viewers, or hearers, in a distinct and unique manner.

It seems to me that one of the central biases of the African sensibility, in whatever making mode, is transformation. I mean by transformation the use of form to *trans-form*, not just “change,” and any form used (be it a thing, a concept—“stuff” that is tangible or intangible) is fundamental to the matrix/matter/substance of the trans-formed. Transformation in making is not unique to African people; however, transformation is a primary goal/thrust in making, and of primary concern in critical evaluation of the “success” of the thing made. The implication for an African artist (African American, Caribbean, etc.), in giving primary emphasis to the transformative, is that making becomes essentially a spiritual concern; it is *believed* to guide the coming into existence of a new “thing” from existing “things.” The word spiritual is used is of necessity an intangible dynamic that informs that transformative process—not necessarily religious, nor sacred. (In scientific processes this could be called catalytic, however the catalyst is a material agent, while what I am describing is an intangible effect that is the driving force in the transformative process.) Having said this, I realize that for a rationalist, the explanation for transformation and the transformative as guiding principles is akin to

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“mumbo-jumbo.” Be that as it may for the rationalist, the effect upon viewers or hearers cannot be denied; what sounds irrational and fundamentally not provable, however, is for the maker and the viewer/hearer *believed to be* the real point in making or bringing forth form.

Therefore, it is clear to me that the work of African American artists follows the same “path” of transformation in making as traditional “African art.” It is obvious that African artists have an aesthetic thrust and that certain preferences are attended. In my opinion, among these preferences are Significance: the viewer must sense that there is *urgency* in the stance of the object or concept; Uprightness: the integrity of the piece standing forth as it is; Beauty: this is a beauty that is powerful and forceful in its material and immaterial vitality, and it is characterized by equilibrium and uprightness. The purpose of these effects is to transport the viewers/hearers—to “speak” to them in a way that is profound. This occurs through the vital contemplation of formal relationships.

What asserts itself as sensibility in a general way is the result of a similar *group of individuals*; particular sensibility does not necessarily separate the person from the group. African sensibility as exercised in making is not limited to African peoples, it is originated by them. This sensibility is established for others by the things African peoples make. African sensibility can be used, is available, is knowable to anyone who wishes to enter into its *demands upon them!* The point is that without African people making things (i.e., concepts, poems, houses, etc.) this sensibility is not originated or knowable. This seems obvious to me; however, it is necessary to speak the obvious to those who accept the idea that African peoples’ sensibility is “not quite” as legitimate as is a European sensibility.

The opportunity for African artists in the “New World” to consistently present their aesthetic sensibility on a national or world stage has not generally been available. The Eurocentric assumption is that the work of African artists adds little or nothing of cultural value to the “world cultural landscape,” as this landscape continues to be defined within

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European parameters. This prevalent attitude and assumption regards the “New World” Africans’ visual artistic sensibility as childish, naïve, instinctual and derivative.

It seems that the medium most *accepted* by Europeans, for Africans in the “New World,” is and has been their music, probably because the physicality of hearing music bypasses the qualitative centers of the rational mind, as music imposes itself in a direct manner by resonating the hearer. On the other hand, there has been a profound rejection of the transformed visual, or verbal, images by Africans in the “New World,” possibly because the visual value system is not readily understood by the European sensibility, and therefore it seems to them to lack cultural legitimacy.

In the United States, African Americans have found themselves in a condition of consistent hostility—hostility fostered and nourished by the State. This State-driven hostility is manifested in personal assaults, community terrorism, economic reprisal and profound disrespect by the larger population of European Americans. The alienation resulting from, and anxiety inherent in this kind of hostile existence has encouraged African Americans to examine and make appropriate exegeses of the effects of this hostility upon themselves and their communities. The spiritual consequences upon oneself of the effects of anger and outrage, the resulting suffering and pain, and the significance for love, friendship, sexuality, freedom, etc., must be assessed constantly to understand one’s states of being and know one’s spiritual health. These comments are meant to speak directly to the effects and affects of racist methodology, and apartheid policy and practice against African people in the “New World.” I believe this ongoing contextual situation within the United States, and the exegeses necessary to understand it, account for the difference in the “look” of the visual work of African American artists from the “look” of “traditional African art.” Notwithstanding, the visual work of African Americans cleaves to the necessity in “African art” to transmute and transform.

I am asking the reader to think about why a maker of African descent is asked to legitimate his or her artistic lineage by Eurocentric standards concerning what African art

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is or is not. Usually, “African art” is used as the standard that legitimates African American artists, rather than *their* sensibility being the standard by which African art comes into existence. It would seem more reasonable to me that African makers be given the same consideration shown other peoples regarding their creative products. Example: Picasso is considered Spanish in sensibility while working in France, though the great bulk of his work is informed by ideas popularized in France. His Spanish heritage is never doubted—he remains thoroughly inside the Spanish tradition while absorbed with, taken with, French art concepts—nor is his immersion in Parisian culture looked upon as in any way detrimental to his Spanish sensibility.

To conclude, again in my opinion, transformation is a guiding principle that charges the African artist with the task of making a thing that is fundamentally powerful in the first instance of its beauty. By powerful I mean the created thing’s ability to stand forth on its own terms, not beholden to that from which it is transformed (even though it is beholden to the forms used in the process of its coming into being). Most makers that I know think of this process as magical, because of the paradox that arises “in the mid”—the absolute necessity for that which has come forth to have arisen from that which was, and yet to *present* only itself, to be listened to, to be heard, to be seen.